

How Legislation Is Brought to the House Floor: A Snapshot of Parliamentary Practice in the 112th Congress (2011-2012)

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Summary

House of Representatives has several different parliamentary procedures through which it can bring legislation to the chamber floor. Which of these will be used in a given situation depends on many factors, including the type of measure being considered, its cost, the amount of political or policy controversy surrounding it, and the degree to which Members want to debate it and propose amendments. This report provides a snapshot of the forms and origins of measures that, according to the Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress (LIS), received action on the House floor in the 112th Congress (2011-2012) and the parliamentary procedures used to bring them up for initial House consideration.

In the 112th Congress, 888 pieces of legislation received floor action in the House of Representatives. Of these, 602 were bills or joint resolutions and 286 were simple or concurrent resolutions, a breakdown between lawmaking and non-lawmaking legislative forms of approximately 68% to 32%. Of these 888 measures, 783 originated in the House and 105 originated in the Senate.

During the same period, 53% of all measures receiving initial House floor action came before the chamber under the Suspension of the Rules procedure; 23% came to the floor as business “privileged” under House rules and precedents; 15% were raised by a special rule reported by the Committee on Rules and adopted by the House; and 7% came up by the unanimous consent of Members. Seven measures, representing approximately 1% of legislation receiving House floor action in the 112th Congress, were processed under the procedures associated with the call of the Private Calendar.

When only lawmaking forms of legislation (bills and joint resolutions) are counted, 72% of such measures receiving initial House floor action in the 112th Congresses came before the chamber under the Suspension of the Rules procedure; 21% were raised by a special rule reported by the Committee on Rules and adopted by the House; and 5% came up by the unanimous consent of Members. Around 1% of lawmaking forms of legislation received House floor action via the call of the Private Calendar and an even smaller fraction of lawmaking measures were “privileged” under House rules.

The party sponsorship of legislation receiving initial floor action in the 112th Congress varied based on the procedure used to raise the legislation on the chamber floor. Sixty-seven percent of the measures considered under the Suspension of the Rules procedure were sponsored by majority party Members. All but three of the 137 measures brought before the House under the terms of a special rule reported by the House Committee on Rules and adopted by the House were sponsored by majority party Members.

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The House of Representatives has several different parliamentary procedures through which it can bring legislation to the chamber floor. Which will be used in a given situation depends on many factors, including the type of measure being considered, its cost, the amount of political or policy controversy surrounding it, and the degree to which Members want to debate it and propose amendments.

According to the Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress (LIS), in the 112th Congress (2011-2012), 888 pieces of legislation received House floor action. This report provides a statistical snapshot of the forms, origins, and party sponsorship of these measures and of the parliamentary procedures used to bring them to the chamber floor during their initial consideration.

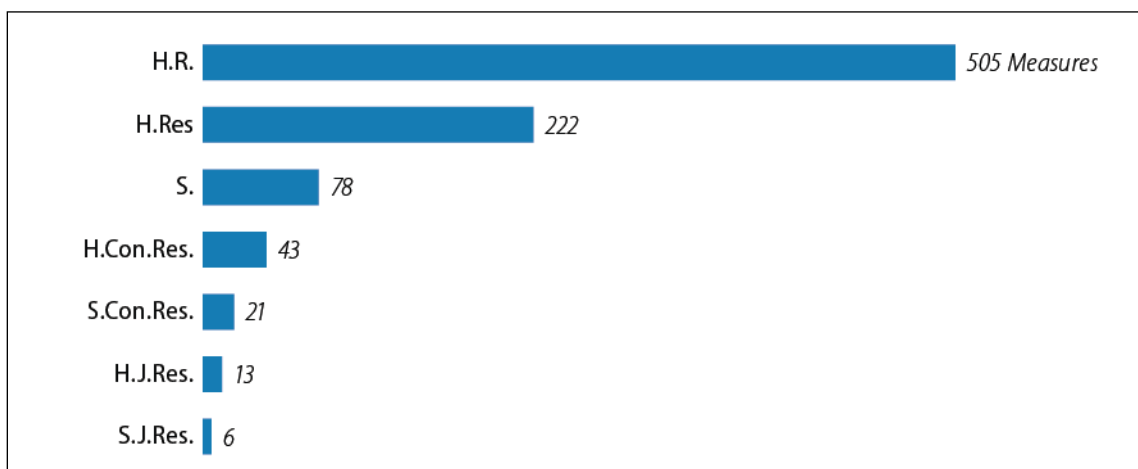
Form of Measures

Legislation is introduced in the House or Senate in one of four forms: the bill (H.R. / S.), the joint resolution (H.J.Res. / S.J.Res.), the concurrent resolution (H.Con.Res. / S.Con.Res.), and the simple resolution (H.Res. / S.Res.). Generally speaking, bills and joint resolutions can become law, but simple and concurrent resolutions cannot; they are used instead for internal organizational or procedural matters, or to express the sentiment of one or both chambers.¹

In the 112th Congress, 888 pieces of legislation received floor action in the House of Representatives. Of these, 602 were bills or joint resolutions and 286 were simple or concurrent resolutions, a breakdown between lawmaking and non-lawmaking legislative forms of approximately 68% to 32%, respectively.

Figure 1. Form of Legislation Receiving House Floor Action

112th Congress (2011-2012)



Source: CRS analysis of data from the Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress (LIS).

¹ For more information on the forms and uses of legislation, see CRS Report 98-728, *Bills, Resolutions, Nominations, and Treaties: Characteristics, Requirements, and Uses*, by Richard S. Beth. Also see CRS Report 98-825, *“Sense of” Resolutions and Provisions*, by Christopher M. Davis.

Origin of Measures

Of the 888 measures receiving House floor action in the 112th Congress, 783 originated in the House and 105 originated in the Senate.

Party Sponsorship of Measures

It is generally accepted that the House considers more legislation sponsored by majority party Members than measures introduced by minority party Members. This was born out in practice in the 112th Congress. As is reflected in **Table 1**, 74% of all measures receiving initial House floor action in the last Congress were sponsored by Members of the Republican Party, which had a majority of seats in the House. When only lawmaking forms of legislation are considered, 72% of measures receiving House floor action in the 112th Congress were sponsored by Republicans, 27% by Democrats, and .004% by political independents.

**Table 1. Political Party Sponsorship of Measures Receiving House Floor Action:
Sorted By Form of Measure**

112th Congress (2011-2012)

Form of Measure	Democratic Sponsor	Republican Sponsor	Independent Sponsor	Total
H.R.	105 (21%)	400 (79%)	-	505
S.	51 (65%)	24 (31%)	3 (4%)	78
H.J.Res.	2 (15%)	11 (85%)	-	13
S.J.Res.	6 (100%)	-	-	6
H.Res.	30 (14%)	192 (86%)	-	222
H.Con.Res.	11 (26%)	32 (74%)	-	43
S.Con.Res.	19 (90%)	2 (10%)	-	21
TOTAL	224 (25%)	661 (74%)	3 (.003%)	888

Source: Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress.

Notes: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. Table reflects initial House consideration of legislation.

The ratio of majority to minority party sponsorship of measures receiving initial House floor action in the 112th Congress varied widely based on the parliamentary procedure used to raise the legislation on the House floor. As is noted in **Table 2**, 67% of the measures considered under the Suspension of the Rules procedure were sponsored by Republicans, 32% by Democrats, and less than 1% by political independents. That measures introduced by Members of both parties were considered under Suspension is unsurprising in that (as is discussed below) Suspension of the Rules is the parliamentary procedure which the House generally uses to process non-controversial measures for which there is wide bipartisan support. In addition, passage of a measure under the Suspension of the Rules procedure, in practice, usually requires the affirmative votes of at least some minority party Members.

The ratio of party sponsorship on measures initially brought to the floor under the terms of a special rule reported by the House Committee on Rules and adopted by the House was far wider. Of the 137 measures the Congressional Research Service (CRS) identified as being initially brought to the floor under the terms of a special rule in the 112th Congress, 134 were sponsored by majority party Members.

The breakdown in party sponsorship on measures initially raised on the House floor by unanimous consent was uneven, with majority party Members sponsoring slightly over half of the measures brought up in this manner.

**Table 2. Political Party Sponsorship of Measures Receiving House Floor Action:
Sorted By Parliamentary Procedure Used to Consider Measure**

112th Congress (2011-2012)

Mode of Consideration	Republican Sponsor	Democratic Sponsor	Independent Sponsor	Total
Suspension of the Rules	318 (67%)	153 (32%)	2 (.004%)	473
Privileged Business	176 (85%)	31 (15%)	-	207
Special Rule	134 (98%)	3 (2%)	-	137
Unanimous Consent	34 (53%)	29(45%)	1 (2%)	64
Private Calendar	-	7 (100%)	-	7
TOTAL	662 (75%)	223 (25%)	3 (.003%)	888

Source: Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress.

Notes: Percentages may not total 100 percent due to rounding. Table reflects initial House consideration of legislation.

Floor Procedures Used in the 112th Congress

The following section documents the parliamentary mechanisms that were used by the House to bring legislation to the floor for initial consideration during the 112th Congress. In doing so, it does not make distinctions about the privileged status such business technically enjoys under House rules. Most appropriations measures, for example, are considered “privileged business” under clause 5 of House Rule XIII (as detailed in the section on “Privileged Business” below). As such, they do not need a special rule from the Rules Committee to be adopted for them to have floor access. In actual practice, however, in the 112th Congress, the House universally provided for the consideration of these measures by means of a special rule, which, in general, could also provide for debate to be structured, amendments to be regulated, and points of order against the bills to be waived. Thus, appropriations measures considered in the 112th Congress are counted in this analysis as being raised by special rule, notwithstanding their status as “privileged business.”

Suspension of the Rules

In recent Congresses, most legislation has been brought up on the House floor by Suspension of the Rules, a parliamentary device authorized by clause 1 of House Rule XV, which waives the chamber’s standing rules to enable the House to act quickly on legislation that enjoys widespread, even if not necessarily unanimous, support. The main features of the Suspension of the Rules procedure include (1) a 40-minute limit on debate, (2) a prohibition against floor amendments and points of order, and (3) a two-thirds vote of Members present and voting for passage. The suspension procedure is in order in the House on the calendar days of Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, during the final six days of a congressional session, and at other times by unanimous consent or special order.² In the 112th Congress (2011-2012), the House Republican leadership

² For more information on Suspension of the Rules, see CRS Report 98-314, *Suspension of the Rules in the House: Principal Features*, by Elizabeth Rybicki.

announced additional policies related to their use of the Suspension of the Rules procedure which restrict the use of the procedure for certain “honorific” legislation, generally require measures considered under Suspension to have been available for three days prior to their consideration, and require the sponsor of the measure to be on the floor at the time of a measure’s consideration.³ These policies continue in force in the 113th Congress (2013-2014).

In the 112th Congress, 473 measures, representing 53% of all legislation receiving House floor action, were initially brought up using the Suspension of the Rules procedure. This includes 435 bills or joint resolutions and 38 simple or concurrent resolutions. When only lawmaking forms of legislation are counted, 72% of bills and joint resolutions receiving floor action in the 112th Congress came up by Suspension of the Rules. Eighty-five percent of measures brought up by Suspension of the Rules originated in the House. The remaining 15% were Senate measures.

Privileged Business

House rules and precedents place certain types of legislation in a special “privileged” category, which gives measures of this kind the ability to be called up for consideration when the House is not considering another matter. Bills and resolutions falling into this category that saw floor action in the 112th Congress include the following:

- Order of Business Resolutions: Procedural resolutions reported by the House Committee on Rules affecting the “rules, joint rules, and the order of business of the House” are, themselves, privileged for consideration under clause 5 of House Rule XIII. Order of business resolutions are commonly known as “special rules,” and are discussed below in more detail.⁴
- Committee Assignment Resolutions: Under clause 5 of House Rule X and the precedents of the House, a resolution assigning Members to standing committees is privileged if offered by direction of the party caucus or conference involved.⁵
- Correcting Enrollments: Under clause 5 of House Rule XIII, resolutions reported by the Committee on House Administration correcting errors in the enrollment of a bill are privileged.⁶
- Providing for Adjournment: Under Article I, Section 5, clause 4, of the Constitution, neither house can adjourn for more than three days without the consent of the other. Concurrent resolutions providing for such an adjournment of one or both chambers are called up as privileged.⁷
- Questions of the Privileges of the House: Under clause 2 of House Rule IX, resolutions raising a question of the privileges of the House, affecting “the rights of the House collectively, its safety, dignity, and the integrity of its proceedings,” are privileged under specific parliamentary circumstances described in the rule.⁸ Such resolutions would include the constitutional right of the House to originate revenue measures.

³ House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, *Legislative Protocols for the 112th Congress*, February 23, 2011, available at <http://www.majorityleader.gov/protocols>.

⁴ U.S. Congress, House, *Constitution, Jefferson’s Manual, and Rules of the House of Representatives*, H.Doc. 111-157, 111th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: GPO, 2011), §853. (Hereinafter cited as “*House Manual*.”)

⁵ *House Manual*, §757.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *House Manual*, §84.

⁸ *House Manual*, §699.

- **Bereavement Resolutions:** Under House precedents, resolutions expressing the condolences of the House of Representatives over the death of a Representative or of a President or former President have been treated as privileged.
- **Measures Related to House Organization:** Certain organizational business of the House, such as resolutions traditionally adopted at the beginning of a session notifying the President that the House has assembled, electing House officers, as well as concurrent resolutions providing for a joint session of Congress, have been treated as privileged business.

In the 112th Congress, 207 measures, representing 23% of the measures receiving floor action, came before the House on their initial consideration by virtue of their status as “privileged business.” All but three of these 207 measures were non-lawmaking forms of legislation, that is, simple or concurrent resolutions. Of the three bills or joint resolutions receiving action, two were joint disapproval resolutions privileged by statute, and one was a Senate bill formally rejected by the House as a question of the privileges of the House.⁹ The most common type of measure brought up in the House as “privileged business” during the 112th Congress was special orders of business (special rules) reported by the Rules Committee, followed by resolutions assigning Representatives to committee.¹⁰

By Special Rule

A special rule is a simple resolution that regulates the House’s consideration of legislation identified in the resolution. Such resolutions, as noted above, are sometimes called “order of business resolutions” or “special orders.” Special rules enable the House to consider a specified measure and establish the terms for its consideration. For example, how long the legislation will be debated, what, if any amendments may be offered to it, and whether points of order against the measure or any amendments to it are waived. Under clause 1(m) of House Rule X, the Committee on Rules has jurisdiction over the “order of business” of the House, and it reports such procedural resolutions to the chamber for consideration. In current practice, although a relatively small percentage of legislation comes before the House via special rule, most measures that might be characterized as significant, complicated, or controversial are brought up in this way.

In the 112th Congress, 137 measures, or 15% of all legislation receiving House floor action, were initially brought before the chamber under the terms of a special rule reported by the Rules Committee and agreed to by the House. Of these, 124 (91%) were bills or joint resolutions and 13 (9%) were simple or concurrent resolutions. When only lawmaking forms of legislation are counted, 21% of bills and joint resolutions receiving floor action in the 112th Congress came up by Special Rule. Ninety-nine percent of the measures considered under a special rule during the 112th Congress originated in the House, 1% being Senate legislation. As is noted above, all but three measures brought before the House using this parliamentary mechanism was sponsored by a majority party Member.

⁹ The practice of the House formally rejecting a measure sent to it by the Senate which violates the House’s Constitutional prerogative to originate revenue measures is colloquially referred to as “blue-slipping.” For more information on this practice, see CRS Report RS21236, *Blue-Slipping: The Origination Clause in the House of Representatives*, by James V. Saturno.

¹⁰ For more information, see CRS Report 98-315, *Privileged Business on the House Floor*, by James V. Saturno.

Unanimous Consent

In current practice, legislation is sometimes brought before the House of Representatives for consideration by the unanimous consent of its Members. Long-standing policies announced by the Speaker regulate unanimous consent requests for this purpose. Among other things, the Speaker will recognize a Member to propound a unanimous consent request to call up an unreported bill or resolution only if that request has been cleared in advance with both party floor leaders and with the bipartisan leadership of the committee of jurisdiction.¹¹

In the 112th Congress, 64 measures, or 7% of all legislation identified by LIS as receiving House floor action, were initially considered by unanimous consent. Of these, 33 (52%) were bills or joint resolutions and 31 (48%) were simple or concurrent resolutions. When only lawmaking forms of legislation are counted, 5% of bills and joint resolutions receiving floor action in the 112th Congress came up by unanimous consent. Of the measures initially considered by unanimous consent during the 112th Congress, 64% originated in the House.

Call of the Private Calendar

Clause 5 of House Rule XV establishes special parliamentary procedures to be used for the consideration of private legislation. Unlike public legislation, which applies to public matters and deals with individuals only by classes, the provisions of private bills apply to “one or several specified persons, corporations, [or] institutions.”¹² When reported from House committee, private bills are placed on a special Private Calendar established by House Rule XIII. The consideration of Private Calendar measures is in order on the first and (if the Speaker of the House so chooses) third Tuesday of a month. On those days, the Private Calendar is “called” and each measure on it is automatically brought before the House in order. Private bills are considered under a set of procedures known as the “House *as in* Committee of the Whole,” which is a hybrid of the procedures used in the full House and those used in the Committee of the Whole. Under these, private bills may be debated and amended under the five-minute rule, although in practice, they are almost always passed without debate or record vote.¹³

In the 112th Congress, seven measures were brought to the floor via the call of the Private Calendar.

Other Parliamentary Mechanisms

The House of Representatives has established special parliamentary procedures that might be used to bring legislation to the chamber floor dealing with the business of the District of Columbia, a discharge process to force consideration of measures triggered by a petition signed by a numerical majority of the House, and a procedure known as the Calendar Wednesday procedure.¹⁴ These procedures are rarely used, and no legislation was brought before the House in the 112th Congress by any of these three parliamentary mechanisms.

¹¹ William Holmes Brown, Charles W. Johnson, and John V. Sullivan, *House Practice, A Guide to the Rules, Precedents and Procedures of the House* (Washington: GPO, 2011), ch. 54, §2, pp. 892-893.

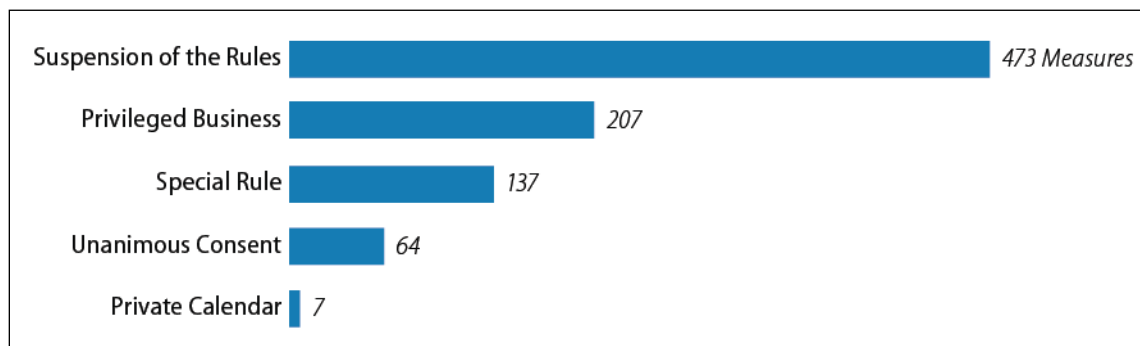
¹² Asher C. Hinds, *Hinds' Precedents of the House of Representatives of the United States* (Washington: GPO, 1917), vol. 4, §3285.

¹³ For more information, see CRS Report 98-628, *Private Bills: Procedure in the House*, by Richard S. Beth.

¹⁴ For more information on these procedures, see CRS Report 98-315, *Privileged Business on the House Floor*, by James V. Saturno, and CRS Report 98-394, *Discharge Procedure in the House*, by Richard S. Beth.

Figure 2. Procedures Used to Bring Measures to the House Floor

112th Congress (2011-2012)



Source: Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress (LIS).

Note: Chart reflects initial House consideration of all legislation, regardless of legislative form.

Table 3. Parliamentary Procedures Used to Bring Measures to the Floor of the U.S. House of Representatives

112th Congress (2011-2012)

Parliamentary Procedure / Percentage of Measures Considered	H.R.	S.	H.J.Res.	S.J.Res.	H.Res.	H.Con.Res.	S.Con.Res.	TOTAL
Suspension of the Rules / 53%	370	61	2	2	21	10	7	473
Privileged Business (207 Total) / 23%								
Special orders of business (including those tabled)	0	0	0	0	128	0	0	128
Committee assignment resolution	0	0	0	0	34	0	0	34
Question of privileges of the House (including “blue-slipped” Senate bills, authorizing document production by House committees, contempt citations)	0	1	0	0	5	0	0	6
Providing for adjournment / Recess	0	0	0	0	0	5	7	12
Chamber organizational related	0	0	0	0	12	1	0	13
Providing for a joint session or meeting	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
Bereavement resolution	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
Correcting engrossment or enrollment / Requesting return of papers	0	0	0	0	2	3	1	6
Granting deposition authority to a committee	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Privileged by rule making statute	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Dismissing election contest	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ethics investigation / discipline	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
By Special Rule / 15%	116	2	6	0	7	6	0	137
Unanimous Consent / 7%	13	13	3	4	10	15	6	64
Call of the Private Calendar / 1%	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	7
D.C. Business / Discharge Petition / Calendar Wednesday / 0%	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	505	78	13	6	222	43	21	888

Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS) analysis of data from the Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress (LIS).

Notes: Table reflects initial House consideration of measures receiving floor action between January 5, 2011, and January 3, 2013. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

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